NEGOTIATING EXPECTATIONS IN THE FIELD: GATEKEEPERS, RESEARCH FATIGUE AND CULTURAL BIASES

Jennifer L. Mandel
Department of Geography and Regional Studies, University of Miami, USA

ABSTRACT
This paper considers disjunctures between my expectations and experience of doing dissertation fieldwork, which I conducted in Benin between the autumns of 1997 and 1998. The research examined the nature of women’s livelihood strategies and their associated outcomes in terms of material well-being. I now believe that my feminist worldview, and my growing exhaustion as the project progressed, resulted in my minimising the importance of key aspects of fieldwork in an African context. Specifically, I downplayed the importance of negotiating with male “gatekeepers” in gaining access to the women with whom I wanted to work. While most of the time I was able to manage this well enough, one day, in particular, stands out as a time when I handled these negotiations very poorly. This paper compares the experiences of that day with another much more productive and fruitful one to examine how and why expectations and experience can diverge. A consideration of some of the issues that resulted in the “lost day” might prove instructive for other researchers.

Keywords: fieldwork, gender, livelihood strategies, gatekeepers, Benin, Africa

INTRODUCTION
I went to Benin in the autumn of 1997 to conduct my dissertation research on women’s livelihood strategies in Porto Novo. I embarked on this project armed, I thought, with ample knowledge, grounded in feminist methodologies, about how to carry out “good” research that was sensitive to issues of positionality and self-reflexivity. While this may have been true, in the process of doing the work I discovered that I was not prepared to cope with all situations with equanimity and grace. As Peil (1993:71) indicates, it is impossible to plan for every contingency: methods training can only provide “a rough outline of how researchers behave in the field”.

This paper considers some disjunctures between my expectations and experiences in carrying out this fieldwork.

I now believe that my feminist worldview, and my growing exhaustion as the project progressed, resulted in my minimising the importance of key aspects of fieldwork in an African context. Specifically, I downplayed the importance of negotiating with male “gatekeepers” in gaining access to the women with whom I wanted to work. While most of the time I was able to manage this well enough, one particular day stands out as a time when I handled these negotiations very poorly. In
terms of the project overall, this “lost day” of work did not amount to much. I still had the privilege of meeting many women of a variety of backgrounds, which resulted in more than enough surveys and interviews of good quality for the successful completion of my dissertation. Nonetheless, a consideration of some of the issues that resulted in the “lost day” might prove instructive for other researchers.

In comparing the events that led up to that day in the field with another more rewarding experience, I hope to provide some insight into issues that are too easily glossed over, including the need to consider the role of authority figures at a variety of scales (negotiating with “gatekeepers”), and taking care of oneself (researcher fatigue). As a new researcher, I wanted to do as much fieldwork as possible, especially as I could not anticipate when I would have another opportunity to spend more than a year in the field. This drove me to work very hard, resulting in considerable weariness as the work progressed. Not paying attention to this resulted in an increasing difficulty in holding my own western feminist cultural biases in abeyance1 and lulled me into a false sense of security about negotiating with “gatekeepers”. Here were the causes of the “lost day” of work.

Before I address these issues in more detail, I will provide some further background. I first provide a brief description of the project, including its goals and objectives, before describing my methodological preparation for the field. I then discuss the implementation of my field methods in Benin, and provide some depth by comparing two experiences of negotiating with “gatekeepers” – one positive and successful, the other leading up to the “lost day”. I conclude by examining these two experiences from the perspective of my expectations prior to initiating the fieldwork. I aim to understand why expectations and realities diverged, and to tease out some lessons learned that might benefit others conducting fieldwork in “the tropics”.

THE PROJECT: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN’S LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES IN PORTO NOVO, BENIN

The primary goal of my dissertation research was to examine how women living in an urban African setting construct livelihood strategies by combining a number of different income-generating activities. Considerable research exists on the use of this type of strategy by households, especially in rural areas, both in “the tropics” and in more developed country settings (Lobao & Meyer, 1995; Coombes & Campbell, 1996). Research on individual use has been, until recently, somewhat less evident, but frequently primarily considers engagement in multiple income-earning activities as part of a broader household strategy. Moreover, much of this work is concerned with livelihood strategies largely in the context of broader macro-economic changes (Chant, 1996; 2003; Moser, 1997; Moser & Holland, 1997; Moser & McIlwaine, 1997). Only recently have individual livelihood strategies become more explicitly theorised as an object of study (Ellis, 2000; Francis, 2000; Rakodi, 2002). While this research, as well as that on women’s economic activities in “the tropics” generally, and in African urban contexts specifically, suggests that women rarely have only one source of income, the reasons and methods for combining activities have yet to be examined in any detail (Robertson, 1990; Aina, 1991; Davison, 1996).

Additionally, until the late 1990s (about the time I was going to Benin), little if anything was understood about the implications of this approach for women’s well-being and that of their families. This seemed critically important in light of the fact that in many parts of Africa women are the primary providers for themselves and their children (Dennis, 1991; Aspaas, 1998; Berger & White, 1999). As a feminist geographer, reading the development literature prior to fieldwork, it sometimes seemed that women are understood frequently
as victims who are barely surviving economically, a view which, in part, probably reflects the emphasis placed on poor and/or marginalised women in development research. Nonetheless, this is only a partial reality, and literature on African women suggests that under some conditions women might be able to create profitable livelihood strategies. My hope was that by understanding the full range of the livelihood strategies that women construct, and their associated outcomes in terms of material well-being, it might be possible to identify factors that provide women greater opportunities for income-generation.

Drawing on the work of the feminist economist Nancy Folbre (1994), I defined livelihood strategies as the mobilisation of an individual’s access to assets (financial, material and social capital), formal rules governing personal and business interactions, and social norms. Within this context, women make “purposeful choices” about how best to provide for their own well-being and that of their families. I further understood that livelihood strategy configuration manifests, in urban settings, in specific combinations of income-generating activities. This framework is consistent with others associated with research on sustainable livelihoods in rural and urban settings (Ellis, 2000; Francis, 2000; Rakodi, 2002).

It is important to note here that my main objective was to identify the patterns of variation in women’s livelihood strategies and the concomitant outcomes. Examining the processes behind those patterns was important, but only secondarily so. Therefore, despite considerable debate among feminist geographers regarding its appropriateness, I chose to use a survey as my main research tool (Reinharz, 1992; Lawson, 1995). To address some of the concerns raised in feminist methodologies, the surveys included a significant number of open-ended questions and were conducted in the form of a semi-structured interview. The variables and their associated categories created for quantitative analysis were derived from the surveys using a grounded theory approach based on a content analysis of the open-ended questions. Additionally, in-depth life and economic history interviews were conducted to provide greater detail about the processes behind livelihood strategy configurations. The methodology, therefore, interwove qualitative and quantitative methods to render results that were theoretically generalisable, while simultaneously appreciating the complexities of Beninois women’s lives.

My intention was to focus specifically on Yoruba women, as they have a long history of independent, entrepreneurial activity that is often highly lucrative. Despite this similarity among Yoruba women, variations in class, education and age result in differences of opportunity. I thus anticipated observing a wide array of livelihood strategy configurations despite focusing on a single ethnic group (Dennis, 1991). However, though I developed considerable knowledge about Yoruba women through library research and preliminary fieldwork in Nigeria during the summer of 1994, I had never visited Benin prior to launching my dissertation fieldwork there. This reflected the first unanticipated change in my research project, a change in the field site, originally meant to have been in Nigeria but required by political and economic conditions there at the time. Even had I been able to acquire the necessary authorisations to do the work (which was not at all assured), I anticipated problems in people’s willingness to work with me, and my Nigerian contacts confirmed this.

Porto Novo, Benin, seemed like an excellent alternative site for a number of reasons. First, owing to its location on the southwestern Nigerian border, there was a considerable Yoruba population. Indeed, they comprised the second largest ethnic group in the city, the largest being the Goun (a sub-group of the Fon). Second, there is limited literature available on Benin in English, as it is a Francophone country. Third, my fluency in
French meant that language would not be a barrier.

The major problem was that I had never been to Benin previously, and there were only limited resources, mostly historical, with which to familiarise myself with the local context. Consequently, there were several key issues I could not anticipate. For example, Benin had a long postcolonial experience of Afro-Marxism. Literature on the impacts of various forms of socialist states on women in other contexts suggests that, while women might have greater opportunities for education and employment under socialist regimes, they continued to be disadvantaged in a variety of ways.

Two elements have been consistently identified as particularly important in explaining the continuing subordination of women: the inadequacies of Marxist theory and the existence of various institutional forms of male dominance in the state and society as a whole — in a word, “patriarchy” (Molyneux, 2001:108-09).

Moreover, in some contexts, women may not only be disadvantaged in terms of wage employment, but also experience erosion of their traditional occupations as these means of income-generation were often abolished under socialist regimes. Yet, it was difficult to assess, prior to going there, to what extent, if any, socialism impacted women’s entrepreneurial activity in Benin. I knew that trade, in general, was the dominant economic activity to which African women have access, but that socialism in African contexts did not necessarily impact this (Allen, 1989; Maula, 1997).

It was especially difficult to imagine that Yoruba women in Benin would not be actively engaged in trade, as this has been their dominant economic activity since the founding of the Yoruba Kingdom, which seems to have been firmly established several hundred years prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in West Africa in the fifteenth century (Smith, 1969). Yoruba culture, which is polygamous, dictates that women are the main providers for themselves and their children. As such, women are provided a sum of capital at marriage with which to start some entrepreneurial activity, and from which they are expected to support themselves and their children. Within this household economy, there is no pooling of resources, and individuals frequently hide their actual financial worth from other household members, especially those of the opposite sex (Afonja, 1986).

PREPARING FOR THE FIELD

Prior to discussing in detail how I prepared for my fieldwork, let me say a little bit about some relevant aspects of my background and the kind of geography programme in which I was enrolled. My father worked for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for over 30 years. As a result, I spent most of my childhood living in “the tropics”. This impacted my preparation for the field in two ways. First, I was probably a bit arrogant about my ability to adapt to any situation as I had travelled extensively and lived in many parts of the so-called developing world, including other parts of Africa. Second, I was aware of the neocolonial aspects of my upbringing, which probably led me to overestimate the level of authority I would bring to the field by virtue of my position as an upper middle-class, highly educated, western woman. This is fundamentally ethnocentric in that it assumes that Beninois people would understand authority in the same way I do.

My academic training also impacted my choice of methods and preparation for the field. I started graduate school at a moment of significant change in the programme, and American Geography more generally. The reputation of Geography at the Ohio State University was founded on its prominence in the positivist turn of the 1960s and 1970s. This
was still evident in that the only methods courses taught in, and required by, the department were quantitative ones. I was, therefore, encouraged to find qualitative methods courses in sociology instead. My focus, and that of other graduate students at the time, on a fieldwork and primary data-oriented dissertation was part of what might be considered the first wave of diversification in the research approaches advocated by the department. This training influenced the kinds of questions I was inclined to ask – that is, those concerned with pattern over process.

Focusing principally on interview and survey methods, I therefore read extensively on feminist methodologies, and qualitative methods more generally. In doing so, I considered ways of addressing feminist concerns about generalising women’s life experiences using statistical analysis, while simultaneously planning to use those methods as one way of addressing my research questions. From this, I understood that two issues were of key importance. There was, first, the matter of my positionality relative to the women with whom I wanted to work. Second, there was a need to address reflexively my own role in the production of knowledge. The main focus of interview and survey approaches to research is on the dyadic relationships between the researcher and the informant. Thus, my principle focus in preparing for the field was considering how to establish rapport and trust with informants (Reinharz, 1992; Nast, 1994).

I addressed establishing rapport and trust through a variety of mechanisms. First, although I believe it is impossible actually to become an “insider,” I recognised the importance of understanding, and demonstrating an appreciation for, local culture. Toward that end, I studied Yoruba language and culture for four years prior to leaving for Benin. I also planned to dress in culturally appropriate attire, both because it was likely to be more comfortable and because it would demonstrate respect for local culture. Second, I anticipated having women research assistants and asked for the necessary funds in my grant applications. This latter aim reflected an awareness that my language skills, while considerable, would probably be insufficient for understanding the nuances of women’s answers. Moreover, women were likely to be uncomfortable speaking with men about their economic circumstances. Household resources are seldom pooled among African ethnic group and, as noted above, especially not among the Yoruba. Therefore, people often hide how much they actually earn, especially from members of the opposite sex (Dwyer & Bruce, 1988). It was important to have women who could not only act as interpreters for me in the interview process, but also help conduct surveys.

Third, to address issues of positionality explicitly, I planned to be very honest about the limits of my research in effecting changes in the lives of the women who agreed to work with me. In other words, whatever I might hope for in terms of the long-term impacts of my research, I could not promise that there would be any benefits to anyone. I also planned to be open in answering any questions people had about me, while downplaying my professional status. I wanted to present myself as the learner that I was by explaining to my informants that I was trying to understand something about their lives. While, as noted above, this may have reflected an ethnocentric understanding of authority, in fact, it was noticed and appreciated by some of the women with whom I worked. For example, one woman who participated in both the survey and interview insisted on stating on tape that the reason she had been willing to help me was because I had demonstrated an appreciation and respect for their culture, and that I had not presented myself as an authority.

My readings on conducting research in developing country contexts made me aware that, in addition to having a deep understanding of the local cultural context, I
would encounter and have to negotiate with “gatekeepers”. This literature indicates that not only are there authority figures that act as gatekeepers within the national and local government, but neighbourhood chiefs also act as information brokers (Gilbert & Ward, 1985; Peil, 1993; Hasan, 2002; Jenkins et al., 2002). Moreover, this work suggested that, with the help of local contacts, obtaining the necessary authorisations was usually achievable. I thus established contact with a Beninois professor of geography who was willing to assist me with my project.

Peil (1993:76) notes that “even experienced researchers often assume that once top authorities have given their permission everyone lower in the hierarchy will fall into line”. In practice, however, this will vary considerably, depending on the interconnectedness of various local hierarchies and the degree of autonomy at each level. In the process of my fieldwork, I learned that, in Benin, neighbourhood chiefs are not part of the official government hierarchy and therefore may exercise considerable authority and autonomy, depending on the local context. Moreover, some may be particularly officious and could cause considerable problems if their authority is not sufficiently respected. Like others before me, however, I fell into the trap of assuming that with the professor’s assistance I would encounter few problems.

Armed with this knowledge and plan, I believed that although things would change in the field, I was equipped to deal with virtually any eventuality. As noted above, to some extent this reflected an unrealistic sense of my own adaptability. Upon arriving in Benin, I expected to spend a month or so getting the necessary authorisations, finding research assistants, and generally preparing to start collecting data. After that I anticipated being able to work directly with women. Three things influenced these initial expectations. First, I understood from my library research, and from my experience in Nigeria, that Yoruba women are exceedingly independent. Second, as noted above, given my understanding of Yoruba culture, I did not anticipate having any problems negotiating with “gatekeepers” at the neighbourhood scale once I obtained authorisation from government officials at national and local levels. Third, my own western feminist cultural bias led me to believe that I should be able to work with Yoruba women directly.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

As is usual for fieldwork-oriented research, things did not go exactly as planned. While my fundamental objectives and methodologies did not change substantially, several other aspects of the project did. To contextualise the issue of negotiating with “gatekeepers”, I will first describe each of the various steps in project implementation, including a discussion of the changes that occurred.

The professor with whom I worked in Benin was, indeed, very helpful in obtaining the necessary authorisations from the national and local government. He was fairly well known and respected as a researcher and, before I left Benin, he was appointed as a minister in the government responsible for the development of small and medium enterprises. Armed with a letter from him, I had no trouble obtaining a long-term visa that permitted research or authorisation to conduct my work in Porto Novo from various relevant local officials, including the préfet (governor) and the head of the Centre D’Action Regionale pour le Developpement Rural (CARDER), an agency in charge of local development. With their permissions, and the letter from the professor, I did not anticipate any further “gatekeeper” problems.

The professor also assisted me in obtaining a research assistant by suggesting that I hire one of his male students, Pierre. Given that I did not want to be rude and ungrateful, I decided I would work with him through the first stage (preliminary survey) of the research,
then find a polite way to switch to female research assistants. This was the second unanticipated change in the project. I found, however, that he was exceedingly helpful in establishing some initial contacts with local government officials and getting the first phase of the project going.

After obtaining the necessary authorisations and getting a feel for Benin generally, and Porto Novo specifically, I set out to conduct a preliminary survey based on questions I had formulated prior to starting the fieldwork, and which I further developed with assistance from the professor. Based on advice from Pierre and the professor, I decided to conduct the preliminary survey with women’s groupements (work groups). They already had contact with several groupements from their own earlier research, which facilitated the process of gaining entrée considerably. Moreover, it allowed me to test the questions I planned to use in the main survey to see if they would elicit the information I wanted. In addition, I could get a sense of the geography of ethnic group residential arrangements in Porto Novo, which would assist in determining where best to conduct the main survey. Further, I would gain some initial contacts that would be helpful when implementing the main survey.

Pierre was very knowledgeable about women’s groupements and facilitated initial contacts with a number of different ones. After establishing these preliminary connections, we used a snowball sampling method to establish linkages with others. Virtually all the women’s groupements had men as their presidents and secretaries. When I asked why this was the case, I was given two different answers. Men explained that the majority of women involved were illiterate and, therefore, that they acted as record keepers and liaised with government officials who occasionally had resources to assist the groupements. In contrast, women stated that men were in charge because it was impossible to have more than two or three women together without conflicts and problems emerging. These men were the first micro-scale “gatekeepers” I encountered.

Although I planned mainly to survey Yoruba members of the groupements, it quickly became apparent that focusing the research only on Yoruba women would not only be difficult, but would not allow me to incorporate the spatial aspects of my study. I intended to conduct research in different areas of the city on the assumption that economic opportunities would vary among neighbourhoods based on their proximity to business centres and markets. Most members of the groupements were Goun rather than Yoruba. Although ethnic group residential segregation was limited, the Yoruba were somewhat dominant in the city centre. I therefore decided that the geographic component of the work was more important than the ethnic one and changed the focus of the research, from Yoruba women alone, to include women of all ethnic groups.

Although Goun women do not have the long, well-established history of independent entrepreneurial activity of the Yoruba, all the women I met in the first few months of fieldwork were actively engaged in a wide variety of remunerated activities, which often served both productive and reproductive needs (e.g. selling prepared food that their children ate as well). Moreover, focusing on women of all ethnic groups added another dimension of difference that would enrich my analysis of the factors shaping women’s opportunities in livelihood strategy configuration. Given that my assistant(s) were conducting the majority of surveys (yet another unanticipated change that facilitated the work), my lacking specific knowledge of the Goun language and culture was not an impediment as people were appreciative of my efforts to learn at least one local language, irrespective of their own.

Once the preliminary survey was complete, I assessed the results with an eye toward how I would implement the long/in-depth survey. Together with Pierre, I picked out six areas of the city in which to conduct the surveys –
two on the peri-urban fringe, where most of the groupements were located; two in the suburbs where we had established connections through the groupements; and two in the city centre, where we did not have any contacts. After discussing my plans for the research, Pierre understood why it would be difficult to work with a male research assistant and helped me find two women who were interested in working on the project. Delphine, a Goun, was a Masters student in English who he knew from the university, and Susan, his cousin’s wife, was a Yoruba from Porto Novo who had completed high school. After our experience with the groupements, we determined that it would be best for the women to conduct the surveys in local languages where women did not speak French, but that I would be present and conduct those where it was possible to use French.

Delphine and Susan were very helpful in developing a longer, more in-depth survey, based on the preliminary ones. They assisted me in understanding how to ask questions to obtain the information I wanted. For example, because children are considered to be wealth in and of themselves, it is culturally inappropriate to ask someone how many children she has. And speaking of how many children one has is viewed as bragging; therefore asking God to take away some of your riches. Instead, we developed a more indirect but socially sensitive way, through a series of questions, of obtaining the information that simultaneously provided detailed information concerning household composition. Their participation in developing the survey also facilitated in their helping shape the objectives of the research; Susan, in particular, was very interested in what we would learn.

Once we felt the survey was as complete as possible, we set out to implement it, starting with neighbourhoods on the peri-urban fringe where Pierre and I had established the most contacts. Our general strategy was to obtain permission from the neighbourhood chief for conducting the work. Usually, he provided someone to escort us around the neighbourhood to introduce us to women. This assistance provided the authority necessary to put women at ease about talking with us. However, it probably also may have served as a form of coercion, in that women may have felt obligated to agree to participate due the presence of the chief’s representation. In this sense, negotiating with male “gatekeepers” was a double-edged sword; but without it, I would not have been able to conduct the work at all.

In our initial meetings, we asked women if we could make an appointment for an hour of their time when they would not be too busy. Given that most women not only have multiple income-generating activities, but also fulfil numerous roles within their families, we wanted to disrupt their schedules as little as possible. We especially did not want to keep women from remunerative activities critical to their ability to support their families, and I did not have any funds for paying participants. We then returned to conduct the survey(s) at the appointed time. We usually started with a random sampling of every third compound, which could comprise several households, but would occasionally seek out women in particular occupations, age groups or ethnicities if we felt that we were under-sampling in any area. After conducting about 100 surveys in a neighbourhood on the peri-urban fringe, we re-evaluated the success of the survey, made some changes, and then proceeded to the rest of the neighbourhoods.

After long hours in the field, I spent hours reading every survey to be sure I understood the information my research assistants recorded so that I could ask for clarification while the interview was fresh in their minds. I also wanted to input as much of the data as possible while still in Benin, which required developing variables based on a content analysis of the survey questions first. It was important to do all this while still in the field so
that I could ask questions and get clarification if need be. This work was going on simultaneously with the surveys. The result, in combination with how many surveys (535 in total, of which 522 were usable) and interviews (15) we ultimately conducted, was that I became increasingly exhausted as the research progressed. Nonetheless, for the most part things went well because people were willing to help. We only encountered any serious problems in one instance, and this raises the issue of negotiating with “gatekeepers” to which I now return.

CULTURAL BIAS, GATEKEEPERS AND RESEARCHER FATIGUE

The first neighbourhood we worked in was one where we had contacts with people associated with the groupements. Although I had asked questions about why men were in charge of the women’s groupements, this was not perceived as a challenge. In fact, one head that lived in that neighbourhood took great interest in the research and provided a lot of assistance in making contact with both women in the neighbourhood and local officials. As a result of his intervention, I encountered no problems with the neighbourhood chief, who readily provided a liaison. Initially, his representative, a man, walked throughout the neighbourhood with us, introducing us to women and facilitating their assistance with the research. He only stayed with us for a short time, however, as a formality, because I was so well-known in the area.

The extended family of another male local government official who worked with women’s groupements also lived in the neighbourhood, and all the women wanted to participate. As a result, we spent several wonderful days moving from house to house around the area, chatting with women and being introduced to others who also wanted to contribute. Everywhere we went people were warm and friendly, interested in the work and willing to help. When I asked if more women of a particular age or occupation might be willing to participate, invariably several were mentioned, to whom I was then introduced. By the end of my time in Benin, many of the people in this neighbourhood had become good friends.

The local government official who was instrumental in the work in that neighbourhood later told me that part of the reason they readily assisted me was that I had been accorded honorary male status on account of my assertiveness. I suspect, however, that their inclination to facilitate my work was aided by the fact that, when I first met them, Pierre was with me. His presence lent authority to my project, which I did not have on my own. In this instance, I encountered a number of male “gatekeepers” who provided tremendous assistance without which the project would have been much more difficult.

Toward the end of the project period, we began work in the city centre, where we had very few contacts. Interestingly, this was one of the few areas of the city that was clearly dominated by the Yoruba. This led me to believe that having direct access to women would be easier than in other areas of the city. Although I changed my expectations about being able to deal directly with women in general, I was still under the impression that Yoruba women were more independent than Goun (most of the participants up to this point had been Goun). Therefore, I returned to my initial expectations about Yoruba women and my ability to speak directly with them, and did not consider a lack of prior contact a problem.

In fact, that was not the case. It was still critical to contact neighbourhood chiefs whose authority would legitimise the research, making it acceptable for women to work with us. While in most neighbourhoods this had not been problematic, it was in this one. In this instance, the chief misunderstood what I was asking for in the way of a liaison. He thought I was looking for a research assistant and wanted me to hire a woman he knew.
When I realised our miscommunication, I explained that I already had two research assistants and could not hire any more. He then challenged my authority to do the research. When I presented the letter from the professor, by that time appointed as a ministerial head, he said that he had no connection to the minister. I asked from whom he needed a letter – the prefet, the head of CARDER, or someone else. I explained, in a very assertive, perhaps even aggressive, fashion, that I had already been to see everyone, and though I did not have a letter, I could easily obtain one. At that point, having no other way to challenge my work, he was forced to provide the assistance I requested.

The woman who he wanted me to hire as a research assistant escorted us around the neighbourhood. She was very friendly and helpful, not only participating in the survey herself, but ultimately also agreeing to an in-depth interview. That day we scheduled meetings for the following Saturday, for every hour between noon and ten in the evening. When we returned the next Saturday, however, every appointment was cancelled. Given that we did not want to arrive early for each meeting (because we were working around women’s schedules), we spent the whole day waiting in the neighbourhood without conducting a single survey.

That was the “lost day” of work. While sometimes one or two women in other neighbourhoods cancelled or changed their meetings, we had never experienced a day in which everyone cancelled. I believe, although I cannot prove it, that the chief whose authority I challenged had asked the women not to participate after we left the neighbourhood. Although it would be easy to blame him, in reality, my own fatigue made it more difficult for me set aside my expectations and western feminist cultural biases in that instance. For me, exhaustion manifests as extreme irritability, lack of patience and inflexibility. As result, I fell back on my early expectations of having direct access to women and had communicated my irritation at having to negotiate with a male “gatekeeper” by challenging the chief’s authority. Although, as indicated earlier, this lost day did not significantly damage the project, it did result in our having to find another neighbourhood in which to work and extending the survey portion of the fieldwork a bit. It was also an excellent lesson.

CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS LEARNED

In thinking about my fieldwork experience, I have identified several factors that contributed to the events of the “lost day”. Clearly, my expectations of the extent to which I would need to negotiate with male “gatekeepers” were unrealistic. I was also naive about how much fatigue I would experience and of the need to take care of myself. My tiredness diminished my ability to set my own western feminist cultural biases aside.

Three things influenced my initial expectation that I would be able to work directly with women after obtaining the necessary authorisations from government officials. First, I understood Yoruba women’s economic independence as their not having any male authority figures. I assumed that because they had the freedom to engage in their own economic activities without male hindrance that men would not control any aspect of Yoruba women’s lives. Second, from this understanding of Yoruba culture, I underestimated the importance of local gatekeepers. My impression from Nigeria and library research was that men were often not present in the household and, therefore, were not overly involved in women’s lives. Third, my own western feminist cultural bias led me to believe that I should be able to work with Yoruba women directly: it seemed absurd to me that women would need a man’s permission to speak with me. Although I really tried not to judge local customs, I still carried many biases with me. Being aware of
my positionality did not enable me to set these entirely aside.

In the early stages of implementing my project, I was able to overcome and reformulate my expectations and set aside my biases such that I was able to negotiate effectively with the micro-level male “gatekeepers” I encountered. As the research progressed, however, it became increasingly difficult to hold my original expectations in abeyance. This was especially difficult because the last neighbourhoods in which we worked were in the city centre and predominantly Yoruba.

The first neighbourhood in which we worked was one where we had already established contacts through our work with the groupements. As indicated above, I did challenge the authority of the male “gatekeepers” (heads of groupements) I encountered. Nonetheless, they were very accommodating and helpful. I suspect several factors contributed to this. First, I tried to raise the issue of male authority by simply asking questions (presenting myself as the learner). I was probably better able to do this because I was fresh in the field. I was not yet tired and also did not feel comfortable enough with the situation to present myself as anything other than a learner, so the challenge did not come across as threatening. Second, Pierre’s presence, in all likelihood, provided a degree of authority that I did not have on my own, and may have acted as a buffer. Third, my “outsider” status afforded me “honorary male” prestige, which made my assertiveness acceptable.

Likewise, I can identify several factors that resulted in the “lost day”. First, we had no prior contact with people in that neighbourhood. Second, not having a male present meant that I had no visible authority backing up my request. Third, I was tired, but had been in the field long enough to think I could cope with things well because I had not encountered many problems up to that point. As a result, when my reformulated expectations were challenged, I did not handle the situation effectively. Fourth, perhaps because Yoruba women are so independent relative to women of other African ethnicities, men may feel more compelled to assert their authority whenever they have the opportunity.

The most important lesson I have learned from this experience is the necessity of thinking reflexively not only about my role in the production of knowledge, but also about how I am feeling throughout the project. Arguably, these two things go together. In the field, however, especially as a new researcher, it can be easy to neglect the need to take care of oneself. Although the long-term goals of the project were not affected, it might have been wiser to minimise some aspect of the research.

Expectations naturally change as fieldwork unfolds. It is, of course, a process. I argue, however, that one’s ability to cope with these changes may diminish with exhaustion. Often, I think, when we are most tired we rely on what is most comfortable to us, making it difficult to accommodate others’ views on how things should be done. As a result, setting aside early expectations and our own cultural biases may become more difficult. In combination, we can negatively impact our own work. More importantly, we fail to build solid relationships based on trust and open exchange with the people on whose assistance we are relying. This will not only damage our connections with them, but also may make it more difficult for other researchers who come after us.

Irrespective of the specific methods used, fieldwork encompasses an entire social system. Understanding and fitting into that system, therefore, is at least as important as developing rapport and trust with the people with whom we plan to work directly. For me, that meant learning that gender is constructed relationally and, therefore, that it is necessary to incorporate men into my understanding of how my future research projects may evolve, even if they are, ultimately, about women’s lives.
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ENDNOTES

1 When I first arrived in Benin, I believed that in order to be able to appreciate local understandings of gender relations, I needed to suspend my own biases. In the process of doing the work, as will be made clear throughout this paper, I realised that this is impossible, and that the best one can hope for is to hold one’s own biases in productive tension with local understandings.

2 Although people draw on both income- and non-income-generating activities in creating and maintaining their livelihood strategies, in urban settings, as indicated by Rakodi (2002), income-generating activities are especially important due to the cash-oriented nature of these economies.

3 According to the rhetoric, “[i]n the People’s Republic of Benin the development path is socialism. Its philosophical foundation is Marxism-Leninism, which should be applied in a living and creative way to Beninois realities” (article 4 of the Beninois Constitution adopted on 9 September 1977, cited in Allen 1989:50). In reality, however, this did not translate into the nationalisation of land, property or individual entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, only members of tightly controlled government trade unions representing formal wage employees in parastatal industries and the state bureaucracy seem to have been impacted in any significant way.

4 All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved.

5 Instead of asking directly for the number of children, we asked women to list all the members of their household and to specify their relationship with them. We then asked if they had any children who were not members of the household, as people often foster their children with other relatives. In combination, we could then determine how many children a woman had.

REFERENCES


